

# Surat al-Baqara: A Structural Analysis\*

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During the last quarter century or so, compositional studies have come to the fore in Qur'anic scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Analyses of individual suras have done much to dispel the notion, once widespread among Orientalists, that the suras — especially the longer ones — fail to cohere. These studies have employed both linguistic and literary approaches. An example of the former is Salwa El-Awa's recent *Textual Relations in the Qur'an: Relevance, Coherence and Structure* (2005), which pays attention to linguistic markers in the text, such as repetition, and, by way of application, focuses on Sura 33 (Al-Aḥzāb) and Sura 75 (Al-Qiyāma).<sup>2</sup> This article takes a literary approach in examining Surat al-Baqara, the longest sura in the Qur'an. It offers a structural assessment that highlights the sura's overall cohesion and helps to identify in it key themes.

Before proceeding, we may briefly review the contemporary work on Al-Baqara — literary in approach — by Amīn Iṣlāḥī (d.1997; his analysis was published in Urdu, and has been summarized in English by Mustansir Mir), Neal Robinson, A. H. Mathias Zahniser, and David E. Smith. The analyses of the sura have appeared, respectively, in Mir, "The *Sūra* as a Unity: A twentieth century development in Qur'an exegesis" (1993); *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (1996); "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long *Sūras*: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā*" (2000); and "The Structure of *al-Baqarab*" (2001).<sup>3</sup> We shall first reproduce the interpretations of Al-Baqara's structure by these scholars, and then compare their interpretations.

According to Iṣlāḥī, the structure of the sura may be represented as follows:

Introduction: 1–39  
 Address to the Israelites: 40–121  
 The Abrahamic Legacy: 122–62  
 The Sharī'a or Law: 163–242  
 Liberation of the Ka'ba: 243–83  
 Conclusion: 284–86

Robinson finds the following arrangement:

The prologue: 1–39  
 Criticism of the Children of Israel: 40–121

The Abrahamic Legacy: 122–52  
Legislation for the new nation: 153–242  
The struggle to liberate the Ka'ba: 243–83  
The epilogue: 284–86

Zahniser compares these two views and reconciles them, to an extent, in the following perceived arrangement:

Prologue: 1–39  
Islam is for the People of the Book: 40–152  
    (subdivided as “Children of Israel,” 40–121, and “Unite,” 122–52)  
Hinge: 153–62  
Law and Liberation: 163–283  
    (subdivided as “Communal Guidance,” 163–242, and “Free Ka'ba,” 243–83)  
Epilogue: 284–86

Finally, Smith interprets the structure as follows (after the first verse, *alif lām mīm*):

Establishment of the Authority of the Qur'an and Muḥammad: 2–39  
Failure of the Children of Israel: 40–118  
Reaffirmation of the Authority of the Qur'an and Muḥammad: 119–67  
Basic Islamic Legislation: 168–284  
Reaffirmation of Muḥammad's Authority and Concluding Prayer: 285–86

While evidently different, these interpretations do have elements in common. Namely, all of them identify an introductory section, then a section about the Children of Israel (beginning at verse 40), a central section next, then a long section containing Islamic legislation, and a short concluding section. Furthermore, the two most recent interpretations suggest a certain correspondence between the section about the Children of Israel and the long one containing Islamic legislation (Zahniser views these as “two major wings of the sura”; Smith regards the latter in contrast to the former, as correctly representing God's legal revelation after its corruption, and he refers to the return in verses 211–14 and 253 to the subject of the earlier section, the Failure of the Children of Israel<sup>4</sup>). In addition, the interpretations of Robinson and Smith both identify a return at the end of the sura to the material of the beginning.<sup>5</sup>

These important observations about the structure of the sura may in fact be incorporated in an interpretation of the sura, one that explains it as a ring structure. This interpretation we undertake below. Yet it should not be supposed that our undertaking is novel; modern Qur'anic scholars for numerous years have been pointing out ring forms in suras.<sup>6</sup> Ours is merely the first interpretation of Surat al-Baqara that explains it keeping the principles of ring composition particularly in mind.

At this point, it may be useful to recall the signal features of a ring structure. These have been set forth lately by Mary Douglas in *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (2007).<sup>7</sup> The most salient feature, as Douglas indicates, is the correspondence between the beginning and the end. The correspondence usually involves the repetition of a conspicuous word or phrase, such as a proper name; also, there must be

a clear thematic connection between the two sections.<sup>8</sup> The correspondence serves to complete the circle and provide closure. In similar fashion, interior sections correspond to each other: the second section corresponds to the second-to-last, and so on concentrically. The middle section then frequently accords with both the beginning and the end. Within the sections themselves, moreover, there may be found little rings: a section itself may consist of a ring, or a section may consist of multiple rings strung together. And occasionally the overall ring, likewise an internal ring, includes a latch at the end. This is an additional part that makes a second closure, binding the whole together. Such a part typically occurs at the end of a long composition or of a long interior section. It ties the beginning firmly to the end, often by reference once more to the opening phrases and events, and functions thematically as epilogue.<sup>9</sup>

What needs mentioning too is the exegetical use of ring composition. For a ring structure not only holds the text together. The effect of ring composition, according to Douglas again, “is to give special emphasis to the pivotal central point.” By means of concentric patterning, ring composition calls attention to the center. We are drawn to look here for the essential message. As Douglas notes concisely, “The meaning is in the middle.”<sup>10</sup>

We will benefit from this awareness in our analysis below of Surat al-Baqara. First, though, it behooves us to mention the historical circumstances at the time of revelation. Except for small, individual elements which may have come down at a later date,<sup>11</sup> the sura was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad in the months leading up to March 624 CE/Ramaḍān 2 AH, during a period when the Prophet and his followers were newly established at Medina and the first major military confrontation with the Meccan forces of Quraysh was looming, and whilst relations with the local Jewish and Christian communities were contentious. Not surprisingly, as one realizes in studying the sura, it answers pressing concerns of the Muslims at this time. Thematically, the sura differentiates Islam from the two revealed religions, Judaism and Christianity, and identifies the Muslims as a new median community (*ja’alnāḱum ummatan waṣaṭan*, verse 143). It furthermore readies the Muslims for the upcoming clash with the Meccan polytheists. And throughout, it highlights the *sine qua non* of the new religion, of utmost pertinence now in the face of Jewish and Christian rejection in Medina and fierce pagan antagonism abroad: faith.<sup>12</sup>

The sura, 286 verses, consists of nine sections. In the course of our analysis, we also sometimes speak of smaller constituents, which we refer to as subsections. These may or may not be in the form of rings. In addition, twice we refer to latches (attached to rings) within the nine sections. The sections of the sura are arranged according to ring structure as follows:

- A**     1–20
- B**     21–39
- C**     40–103
- D**     104–41

	<b>E</b>	142–52
	<b>D'</b>	153–77
	<b>C'</b>	178–253
	<b>B'</b>	254–84
<b>A'</b>		285–86

It shall be noted that all sections but the introduction, middle, and conclusion — **A**, **E**, and **A'** — begin with formulas of address (i.e., “O you people,” “O Children of Israel,” or “O you who believe”);<sup>13</sup> and that all sections end with clinching statements, either relating to faith, disbelief, their respective consequences, or to God’s capacity to punish for wrongdoing. All are structurally discrete within the comprehensive ring, and indeed all sections, save the introduction which contains two small rings, constitute whole rings themselves. Our method shall be to discuss the individual sections and point out the structure of each, and then to review the correspondences between sections and the structure of the sura as a whole.

## A (1–20)

The first section of Al-Baqara affirms that the Qur’an is guidance (*budan*) for those with faith, and contrasts the believers to the unbelievers, specifically, the hypocrites among them. In stating that the Qur’an is guidance, Sura 2 is thus linked at the beginning with the prayer of Fātiḥa, which ends with a plea for guidance (1:6–7: *ihdinā . . .*).<sup>14</sup> The section consists of two small contrasting rings, summarized as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- 1–2    Qur’an is guidance.
- 3–4    . . . to those who believe
- 5        They are following the Lord’s guidance, and they are the ones who will prosper
- 6–7    Unbelievers are firm in rejection; God has sealed their ears; their eyes are covered.
- 8–14    Some people profess belief, but are hypocrites
- 15–20    They are as the deaf and the blind; God could take away their hearing and sight.

## B (21–39)

Section **B** is addressed to unspecified people, though from the context it becomes clear that the unbelievers are meant.<sup>16</sup> They are exhorted to worship God, their Creator, and challenged to produce a sura like one of the Qur’an should they doubt the divine

origin of the Prophet's message. In the center, they are asked how they can disbelieve, given that God created them, all that is on the earth, and the heavens. There follows the example of the creation of Adam, God's vicegerent on earth, and of his sinning, repentance, and forgiveness. The section closes with a recollection of the Fire awaiting the unbelievers. Here is **B**'s structure:

- 21–24           Exhortation to people: worship the Lord who created you; if you doubt the revelation, produce a comparable sura; beware of the Fire
- 25–26.5<sup>17</sup>     Gardens prepared for those who believe and do good; such as them will have pure spouses and abide therein
- 26.5–29        Question to unbelievers: how can you reject faith, seeing that God created you and the heavens and earth?
- 30–38           Adam and his wife expelled from the Garden; God accepts Adam's repentance; those who follow guidance shall not grieve
- 39               Those who disbelieve and disavow God's signs will abide in the Fire

## C (40–103)

This section is addressed primarily to the Children of Israel. It consists of an exhortation (40–46) to believe in God's message and be pious, and to practice what is right and not just to preach it; a long central subsection (47–96) of specific reminders from religious history of God's favoring of them, His forgiveness, and covenant-breaking on their part; and a concluding subsection (97–103) stating that God is enemy to any enemy of Gabriel, by whom He sends down His message in confirmation of existing scriptures, and that most Children of Israel do not believe.

The central subsection recalls Moses and examples of the Children of Israel's transgression. The group was initially favored with God's message, though repeatedly they ignored it and went astray. The mention of the calf twice and twice again (51, 54; 92, 93) indicates a ring, which prompts us to look in the middle. There we find the parable of the cow (67–74) after which the sura is named. The parable symbolizes the Jews' disregard of Moses and their legalism. They question Moses time and again for particulars after he has told them to sacrifice a cow, evincing unwillingness to obey him and preoccupation with the letter of the law. The text then affirms that their hearts are hard, but that God brings to light what they conceal (72–74), and asks the Muslims rhetorically how they can hope that such as them will believe (75–82).

The middle of **C** exemplifies two key spiritual faults of the Children of Israel, from the Muslim perspective: their tendency to disbelieve prophets and their formal approach to religion. Significantly, the parable is also representative of the way the contemporary Jews of Medina were treating the Prophet — posing many questions, though not out of sincere desire to practice his religion, taking him and his message

lightly. The parable's applicability to the contemporary scene suggests that, in the Prophet's case too, God will bring to light their crimes.

In the last seven verses of **C** (97–103), we find a small ring dealing with faith/disbelief, and a latch featuring a last example of disbelief among the Children of Israel. The small ring is composed as follows:

97 Revelation sent to the Prophet, confirming previous scriptures

98 God is an enemy to those who reject faith

99 Only the perverse refuse to believe

100 Most Children of Israel reject faith

101 When Solomon came, confirming previous scriptures, a party discarded the Book

The latch, verses 102–103, follows this small ring and concludes the section with the example of Solomon and the deviance and disbelief of some of his contemporaries.

The last seven verses likewise close section **C** with numerous repeats from the first seven verses, including references to belief and disbelief (41; 97–103), and to revelation confirming previous scriptures (41; 97, 101). Additionally, the rhyme verb of 42, *ta'lamūn* ("you know"), appears as the rhyme verb of the last three verses, 101–103, in the form of *ya'lamūn* ("they knew"). This verb does not occur in the rhyme position elsewhere in the section. Thus the incidence of the verb prominently in the rhyme position at the end of the section recalls the previous incidence of the verb at the beginning of the section. The repeated clause "if only they knew" (*law kānū ya'lamūn*) in 102 and 103 closes the section with emphasis.<sup>18</sup>

Here is a simplified diagram of **C**:

40–46 Exhortation to Children of Israel: believe in God's message

47–66 Calf

67–82 Cow

83–96 Calf

97–103 Most Children of Israel do not believe

## D (104–141)

**D** constitutes a new, independent section, composed of three consecutive rings that together form one large ring, yet the section is also thematically linked to **C**. It concerns mainly the People of the Book, the Jews and Christians, and responds to their statements against Islam. On the whole, the focus remains on the Jews.

Verses 104–10, the opening of the first ring, are directed to the believers. They are told not to address the Prophet with ambiguous words, and not to question him as Moses was questioned (a link to the previous section). Rather, they should be pious, and not give up the faith when challenged by the People of the Book. Verses 111–15 contain a response

to the Jewish and Christian claim that one must convert in order to enter Paradise. There is also an allusion to the pagans of Mecca, who at the time were forbidding the Muslims to worship in the Ka'ba, and to the horrible destiny that awaits them in the hereafter. In the middle of the first ring, we find a response to the Christian claim that God has a son. Next, symmetrical with the above, there are verses recalling the pagans, and one recalling the Jews and Christians; verse 121 then returns to the subject of the correct practice of religion, stating that those who recite the Scripture correctly are the ones who truly believe in it. The first ring of the section is structured as follows:

- 104–10      Exhortation to believers: don't address the Prophet ambiguously; don't question him as Moses was questioned; don't give up faith
- 111–13      Jews and Christians say only a Jew or a Christian shall enter Heaven
- 114–15      Pagans prevent worship at the Ka'ba
- 116–17      Christians say God has a son
- 118–19      Pagans ask for a miraculous sign; they will dwell in the Fire
- 120          Jews and Christians won't be satisfied unless you follow their ways
- 121          Those to whom God has sent the Scripture, who recite it properly, are the ones who believe in it

Verses 122–33, the central verses of the section, are addressed to the Children of Israel. The verses remind them of another episode from religious history, this one dealing with Abraham and his son Ishmael. In it the two are commanded to sanctify the Ka'ba as a place of worship after Abraham has been tested, an apparent reference to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Ishmael. They build up the foundations of the Ka'ba, and Abraham prays for the security and prosperity of Mecca. He prays also for his and Ishmael's descendents, and that a messenger might rise among them to teach them the Scripture and to purify them.<sup>19</sup> The central ring thus points out for the Children of Israel the importance of Abraham and Ishmael, indicating their connection to Islam, and highlights for them Mecca. Structurally, the latter emphasis also prepares for **E**, as we shall see shortly. Here is the middle ring:

- 122–23      Exhortation to Children of Israel: remember how God favored you with His Message; beware of Judgment Day
- 124          God says to Abraham, I will make you an imam to men
- 125          God made the Ka'ba a sanctuary and commanded Abraham and Ishmael to purify it
- 126          Abraham asks God to make Mecca a city of peace and reward those of its people who believe
- 127          Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the Ka'ba
- 128–29      Abraham asks God to send an apostle who will recite revelation and teach wisdom

130–33 Rhetorical question: who but a fool would abandon the religion of Abraham? Jacob (Israel) says to his sons, God has chosen your religion for you

The section ends with a third small ring responding to the Jews and Christians and articulating in the center the creed of Islam. Its structure is as follows:

134 Summary and warning: Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes will get what they deserve, as will you

135 People of the Book say, become Jews or Christians

136–38 Creed: We believe in God, and in what was revealed to us, and what was revealed to all the prophets; we make no distinction among them, and we bow to Him

139–40 Question to Jews and Christians: How can you argue with us, when God is our Lord and your Lord and we are all responsible for our actions?

141 Summary and warning: Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes will get what they deserve, as will you

The last ring also corresponds with verses 104–21, the first ring. Thus:

104–21 “They say . . .”; “Say [O Prophet] . . .” (in response)  
Christians claim God has a son (Jesus exalted)  
Jews and Christians contend: you must follow our way

122–33 Abraham, Mecca/Ka’ba

134–41 “They say . . .”; “Say [O Prophet] . . .” (in response)  
Creed: We do not differentiate between God’s prophets  
Jews and Christians contend: you must follow our way.

## E (142–52)

In the center of the sura one finds verses about the *qibla*, the prayer direction for Muslims. This is the single place in the Qur’an where the subject is addressed. The verses indicate a new orientation, as previously the *qibla* had been Jerusalem to which the Jews and Christians faced; now the Muslims must face Mecca. Mecca, specifically the Ka’ba, the House of Worship built by Abraham and Ishmael, becomes the religious pole of Islam. The change tests the faith of those who would follow the Prophet, and clearly distinguishes the Muslims from the Jews and Christians.

In the center section also the Muslims are identified as a median community. Here the sura underscores Islam’s position as the new middle of the revealed religions, between the formalism of Judaism, as illustrated in C through the parable of the cow, and the doctrinal extravagance of Christianity, highlighted in the previous section. Islam is positioned as the golden mean. The adherents to the new religion obey God’s law fully



(without losing awareness of the law's spirit) and remain strictly monotheistic. Furthermore, as Robinson observes, "in constituting the Muslims as a 'middle nation,' God was giving them the same status as previously enjoyed by the Children of Israel. This is implied by His intimate use of the first person singular 'I' when addressing them; the reference to His 'favour' towards them, and the injunction to 'remember' Him (vv. 150–152; cf. vv. 47 and 122)."<sup>20</sup>

In the very middle of the section (vv. 147–48), there is emphasis on the truth of this message about the new *qibla*, and an exhortation to doubt not, to have faith. The *qibla* message is connected then to the larger point, applicable to all mankind: each community has its own orientation, verse 148 tells us, so compete with each other in goodness and God will bring you together.<sup>21</sup> This is the answer for a multi-community world: vie with each other in goodness; the prayer orientation itself is of no importance. The Muslims, the new median community, will not have the benefit of God's favor unless they do good.

Here is the structure of **E**:

- 142–43      Regarding *qibla* change: God guides whom He will; Message to Muslim community: Prophet is a witness over you; change in *qibla* is a test of faith
- 144–46      Command to Prophet: turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque
- 147–48      Adjuration: the truth (regarding the *qibla*) is from your Lord, so do not doubt; each community has its own direction, so race to do good and God will bring you together
- 149–50      Command to Prophet: turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque; Command to Muslims: turn your faces in the direction of the Sacred Mosque
- 151–52      Message to Muslim community: We have sent an apostle of your own among you, instructing you in the Scripture and wisdom; do not reject faith

## D' (153–77)

The second half of the sura is addressed primarily to the Muslims, and is concerned more with providing them specific guidance and preparing them to confront the pagans of Mecca than with responding to the Jews and Christians. Accordingly section **D'** assures the Muslims in the first few verses that they will be tried, and adjures patient perseverance and prayer. This leads to the mention of Safa and Marwa, two symbolic monuments of prayer and patient perseverance. It was around these hills by Mecca (now part of the city) that Hagar, mother of the baby Ishmael, prayed and searched for water in the dry desert. Her prayer was answered and she came upon the Zamzam spring. In commemoration of this, pilgrims to Mecca circulate between the hills. Yet the polytheists

had placed two idols atop them, and the early Muslims were hesitant to perform this rite.<sup>22</sup> Verse 158 affirms that there is no harm in doing so, and that God recognizes good deeds. With this verse the rite is reclaimed for God.<sup>23</sup>

The center of this section deals with those who reject faith, those who follow the practices of their ancestors. Because idolaters are wont to make animal sacrifices to their deities, certain laws about food are detailed here.<sup>24</sup> The Muslims are told to eat of what good God has provided for them; they should only avoid carrion, pig, blood, and animals over which any name other than God's has been invoked. Structurally, this central subsection features an instance of parallelism, rather than a concentric arrangement, after introductory verses (161–64) about disbelievers and God and His signs. The parallelism occurs as follows:

- 165–67      Some people follow their ancestors in worshipping rivals to God; they will be punished severely
- 168–69      Injunction: eat what is good and lawful from the earth
- 170–71      Disbelievers say, “we follow the ways of our fathers”, but their fathers were not guided
- 172–73      Injunction: eat of the good God has provided you; God has only forbidden carrion, pig, blood, and animals over which any other name than His has been invoked

Here is the overall concentric structure of **D'**:

- 153–58      Exhortation to believers: seek help through patience and prayer; God will test you with adversity
- 159–60      Those Jews and Christians who conceal guidance are cursed
- 161–73      Those who disbelieve, who worship others besides God, will not leave the Fire
- 174–76      Those Jews and Christians who conceal the Scripture will experience torment
- 177          Good are those who keep up the prayer, who are patient in adversity

## C' (178–253)

Here we come to the long, legislative section, containing revelatory responses to the Prophet to questions he has been receiving about Muslim collective life and individual obligations in Islam. We sense strongly in this section his leadership in articulating God's laws to the nascent community in Medina. While the section consists of God's commands, and hence leaves no room for non-compliance, it simultaneously emphasizes His mercy. Rhyme clauses stressing this aspect occur seven times (182, 192, 199, 218, 225, 226, 235),<sup>25</sup> reassuring the Muslim that God knows human frailty and forgives.

Furthermore, we may notice in **C'** indications of the tense times of the revelatory period, in the messages about jihad and the references to Muslims being fought at the Ka'ba and during the month of pilgrimage (191, 194). Regarding the latter, violence at the Sacred Mosque and during the holy month, Muslims are commanded to fight only when attacked.

This is a diagram of all but the last eleven verses of **C'**:

178–82	<u>Equality in retribution; bequests</u>
183–89	<u>Fasting, superstitions</u>
190–94	<u>Fighting/jihad</u>
195–207	Spending; performing Hajj, offering sacrifice
208–14	Exhortation to believers: enter Islam wholeheartedly; do not backslide; Reminder and assurance: God guides whom He will to the Straight Path; believers will be tested; God's help is near
215	<u>Spending in charity</u>
216–18	<u>Fighting/jihad</u>
219	<u>Drinking wine, gambling</u>
220–42	<u>Orphans, marriage and divorce, widows</u>

The remaining eleven verses constitute a latch. As indicated previously in the overview of ring composition, such an element serves as a second ending to a ring, binding the two halves firmly together. In the case of the latch, notes Mary Douglas in *Thinking in Circles*, “the first ending will finish the immediate business, conclude the story, or round off the laws. The second ending will set the text as a whole in a larger context. . . .”<sup>26</sup> This is the second latch we have encountered in Surat al-Baqara. The first, however, in **C**, was part of the subsection 97–103, a second closure to the internal ring (see discussion of **C** above). Here the latch makes a double closure for the whole section.

We recall, as regards this latch, that the Muslims faced a threat in the form of a large Meccan army. Moreover, God's House was in enemy hands, and it was being defiled by idol-worship. The latch, then, begins with a call to jihad (243–45). There follows the story of the Israelites' defeat of the Philistines and David's slaying of Goliath, part of the Israelites' struggle to reclaim their ark (246–51). The latch concludes with an affirmation that Muḥammad is indeed one of the apostles, and that God fulfills His plan (252–53). Significantly, the band of Israelites was able to defeat the army of Philistines because of the Israelites' faith. And the battle, as Iṣlāḥī has pointed out, prefigures Badr (March 624 CE/Ramaḍān 2 AH), where a small number of Muslims would face an outsized Meccan army and defeat it.<sup>27</sup> The passage thus prepares the Muslims for the struggle against the Meccans (as in 249: “How often has a small force defeated a large

one with God's permission!"). Drawing on an example from religious history, the latch encourages the Muslims for jihad and the coming great enterprise to reclaim God's House.

## B' (254–84)

Section **B'** begins with an address to the believers about giving from what God has provided them, before Judgment Day, and then states in the same verse that it is the disbelievers who are the wrongdoers. The middle element of the ring (255–60) speaks of God, the Omnipotent and Omniscient, Who protects the believers and brings life and death. The long concluding element (261–84) includes parables about charity, encouragements for charitable giving and warnings about usury, and instructions about debts. The section ends with a statement that all belongs to God and an evocation of Judgment Day.

The structure of **B'** resembles that of **B**, insofar as in the middle of each there is a rejoinder to the unbelievers, indicating that it is God Who creates, causes death, and resurrects, and highlighting the error of their unbelief. The sections are also similar thematically, in that both stress God's infinite knowledge. We observe this in the former through the example of God's knowledge of Adam and Eve's sins in the Garden (see also the rhyme phrase of 29 about God's perfect knowledge). In the latter section, rhyme phrases stress the point. In this latter section, concerning principally charity and financial transactions, rhyme phrases refer to God's complete knowledge ten times (256, 261, 265, 268, 270, 271, 273, 282, 283, 284).

Here is a diagram of **B'**:

254	Exhortation to <u>believers</u> ; <u>give of the bounties</u> <u>God has provided you</u> , before the Day comes when there is no bargaining
255–60	God is all powerful and all knowing; God is an ally of those who believe; God gives life and death, resurrects
261–84	<u>Parables about charity</u> ; charity and its rewards; usury and its punish- ments; debts

## A' (285–86)

Likewise section **A'** is similar structurally and thematically to section **A**, inasmuch as they both begin on the subject of belief and end on unbelief (in **A'** the first word is *āmana*, "he believes," and the last is *al-kāfirīn*, "the unbelievers"). However, in **A'**, two verses constitute a single small ring, whereas in **A** verses 1–20 contain two separate rings. Here, at the conclusion, one finds two short prayers: the first for forgiveness said by the prophets, and the second for forgiveness and aid said by the community of Muslims. Between them is the message that God does not place on a soul more than it can bear, and the message emphasizing God's justice that every soul gets what it deserves.

Here is the structure of **A'**:

- 285    Believers
- 285        Forgiveness
- 286    God does not place on a soul a greater burden than it can bear;  
                  each soul gets what it deserves
- 286.5        Forgiveness
- 286.9   Unbelievers

What follows are tables showing parallels between the corresponding sections of the sura (the correspondences here are indicated horizontally):

<b>A</b>	1–5	Believers	<b>A'</b>	285	Believers
	6–20	Unbelievers		286.9	Unbelievers
<b>B</b>	28	Evidence of God: God gives life and death, brings dead back to life	<b>B'</b>	258–60	Evidence of God: God gives life and death, brings dead back to life
	29–30, 32–33	God knows all		255–56, 261, 268, 270–71, 273, 282–84	God knows all
<b>C</b>	43, 87	God gave Moses Al-Kitāb	<b>C'</b>	178, 180, 183, 216	<i>kutiba 'alaykum</i>
	102	Solomon (son of David)		251	David (Solomon's father)
	102–03	latch (to third internal ring)		243–53	latch (to whole section)
<b>D</b>	124	Abraham tried by his Lord	<b>D'</b>	155	God shall try Muslims
	127	Abraham and Ishmael raised God's House		158	Pilgrimage to Sacred House; circulating between Safa and Mina
	140	concealing testimony		159, 174	concealing clear signs, God's revelations
	111, 113, 116, 118, 135	People of the Book say . . . (and Muslim responses)		167, 170	Polytheists say . . . (and Muslim responses)

And below is a simplified diagram that contributes to these tables to show the overall ring structure of the sura (as in the tables above, the correspondences are sufficiently apparent so as not to need emphasis by way of underlying marks):

- A**    Faith vs. unbelief
- B**    God's creation; His encompassing knowledge (here regarding Adam and Eve's sins)
- C**    Moses delivers law to Children of Israel
- D**    Abraham was tested, Ka'ba built by Abraham and Ishmael; responses to People of the Book

- E** Ka'ba is the new *qibla*; this is a test of faith;  
compete in doing good
- D'** Muslims will be tested; Ka'ba, Safa and Mina;  
responses to Polytheists
- C'** Prophet delivers law to Muslims
- B'** God's creation; His encompassing knowledge (here regarding charity and  
financial dealings)
- A'** Faith vs. unbelief

Finally, we should like to call attention to the correspondence in section lengths and the appropriateness of the central section's dimension. One notes that **B–D** totals 121 verses, and that **D'–B'** totals 132 verses, or 121 verses likewise plus the latch to **C'**.<sup>28</sup> One observes, furthermore, that **E** has a length (eleven verses) exactly between those of the long introduction (20 verses) and the short conclusion (two verses). The middle section, which deals with the Ka'ba as the center of Islam and the Muslims as a middle community, is thus, compared to **A** and **A'** (to which it is related thematically), median in length.

Indeed this sura exhibits marvelous justness of design. It is precisely and tightly arranged, as we have seen, according to the principles of ring composition; even the section lengths fit perfectly in the overall scheme. Moreover, the precise structure serves as a guide, pointing to key themes in the sura. These occur, according to the logic of the pattern, at the centers of individual rings and, particularly, at the center of the whole sura. At the center of the sura, again, one finds instructions to face Mecca — this being a test of faith; identification of the Muslims as a new, middle community; and the message that all people, regardless of their *qibla* or spiritual orientation, should race to do good and God will bring them together.

## Endnotes

\* I would like to thank James T. Monroe for his suggestion that I examine Surat al-Baqara as an example of ring composition. Also, I have benefited from the insightful comments of Simon O'Meara and Dina Abourou on a draft of this article.

1. Beginning with Angelika Neuwirth's *Studien zur Komposition der mekkunischen Suren* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981) and followed by Mustansir Mir's *Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Islāhī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986).

2. El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an* (London: Routledge, 2005).

3. See Mustansir Mir, "The *Sūra* as a Unity: A twentieth century development in Qur'an exegesis" in G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'an* (London: Routledge, 1993), 211–24, reprinted in Colin Turner (ed.), *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* (4 vols. London: Routledge, 2004), vol. 4, 198–209 (subsequent references are to this reprint); Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM, 1996), 201–23; A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long *Sūras*: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā*" in Issa J. Boullata (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 26–55; and David E. Smith, "The Structure of *al-Baqarah*," *The Muslim World* 91 (2001): 121–36.

4. Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras" 42; Smith, "The Structure of *al-Baqarab*" 123, 131–32.
5. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an* 222; Smith, "The Structure of *al-Baqarab*" 132. Cf. Abdallah Yousuf Ali, who notes the rounding off of the sura's argument at the end (*The Glorious Kur'an: Translation and Commentary by Abdallah Yousuf Ali* [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.], 116, n. 337).
6. Ring composition is otherwise referred to as chiasmus. See Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," *The Muslim World* 76 (1986): 1–15; cf. Michel Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques dans le Coran: Une analyse structurelle de la sourate 'Joseph' et de quelques sourates brèves," *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'Études orientales (MIDEO)* 22 (1994): 107–95; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an* 141–42, 151–52, 312; Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques des sourates 105 à 114," *MIDEO* 23 (1997): 157–96; A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Sūra as Guidance and Exhortation: The Composition of *Sūrat al-Nisā'* in Asma Afsaruddin, A. H. Mathias Zahniser (eds.), *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 71–85; Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques des sourates 99 à 104," *Annales islamologiques* 33 (1999): 31–62; Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques des sourates 92 à 98," *Annales islamologiques* 34 (2000): 95–138; Robinson, "The Structure and Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2:1 (2000): 89–106; Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques des sourates 85 à 90," *Annales islamologiques* 35 (2001): 27–99; Robinson, "Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3:1 (2001): 1–19; Cuypers, "La composition rhétorique des sourates 81 à 84," *Annales islamologiques* 37 (2003): 91–136.
7. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Cf. Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 40–41.
8. Douglas elaborates with a few examples: "the original mission turns out to have been successful, or it has failed; the setting forth is matched by the journey ended; the command to go into battle at the start is completed by news of the battle being finally won, or lost." *Thinking in Circles* 38.
9. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, esp. 18, 33–38, 43, 47, 68–69.
10. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles* 16, 35.
11. Robinson speculates that vv. 153–62, for example, were revealed some five-six years after the majority of verses. *Discovering the Qur'an* 211–12.
12. I.e., faith in God and in the message recited by His Prophet Muḥammad.
13. Formulas of address often indicate a division in Qur'anic discourse. See Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras" 30–32.
- Translations of Qur'anic excerpts are my own from the Standard Egyptian text.
14. Robinson calls this linkage of consecutive suras "dovetailing." This type of linkage occurs frequently in the Qur'an. See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an* 266–69.
15. Cf. Salwa el-Awa, who perceives the contrast between the opening sets of verses (or rings, as we identify them), observing that the first "speaks of the believers who accept the guidance of the Qur'an and the next speaks of the unbelievers who do not do so." El-Awa, "Linguistic Structure" in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 53–72, 63. The dotted underlines in this summary diagram and the summary diagrams below indicate correspondences between verses.
16. The designation of "unbelievers" of course has a general application. But in an immediate and more specific sense it refers to the multitude of Meccan pagans who had rejected God's message and forced the Prophet's departure from the city in 622. Likewise "hypocrites," though also broad in application, refers in a narrow and local sense to those who professed belief in Medina, where Muḥammad was the leader, while privately disbelieving.
17. The decimal is used occasionally to indicate a position within a verse. Thus .5 signifies the middle of a verse and .9, used below, the end of one.
18. Cf. Q. 39, which closes with repeated expressions of praise in the penultimate and final verses (vv. 74 and 75).

19. These descendents being the Arabs, as the Jews are descended from Isaac. It is stated in verse 132 that Abraham commanded his sons to worship the One God, as did Isaac's son Jacob (the father of the twelve tribes of Israel). So notwithstanding this prayer, which at the Ka'ba refers to the Arabs, it is clear that Abraham intended all his descendents to worship the same God.

20. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an* 211.

21. On Judgment Day; cf. Q. 5:48.

22. These idols may well have been the male, Isāf, and the female, Nā'ila. See T. Fahd, "Isāf wa-Nā'ila" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, vol. 4, 91–92.

23. *The Glorious Kur'an* 62, n. 160; *The Qur'an: A new translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18, n. a–d.

24. See W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 269–311. In the Qur'an, the subject of lawful and unlawful foods frequently follows that of idolatry, as has been noted by Iṣlāhī. Mir, "The *Sūra* as a Unity" 203; cf. 209, n. 33.

25. Cf. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an* 201.

26. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles* 126.

27. Mir, "The *Sūra* as a Unity" 203.

28. Section **C** is 64 verses, while **C'** is 76 verses, or 65 plus the latch (eleven verses). Surrounding these two sections, **B** is nineteen verses, twelve fewer than **B'** (31 verses); while **D** is 38 verses, thirteen more than **D'** (25 verses). The totals for **B–D** and **D'–B'** are therefore exactly equal before including the latch.



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